

Foreign Affairs

Are We, Then, Such Lousy Linguists?

By C. L. SULZBERGER

PARIS, Feb. 7.—President Kennedy has made some exceptionally wise appointments affecting our foreign affairs posture and he has also shown great wisdom in keeping in their posts outstanding officials from the previous Administration.

In the former category we find the trio heading the State Department, plus Mr. Labouisse in I. C. A., Mr. Dillon at the Treasury, Mr. Morrow in U. S. I. A., Mr. Stevenson at U. N., Mr. Nitze in Defense diplomacy, Mr. McCloy for disarmament, Mr. Dean for nuclear negotiations and Mr. Kennan as Ambassador to Belgrade.

In the latter category, we see Mr. Dulles retained for the nonce at C. I. A., Mr. Bohlen for Soviet affairs, and Messrs. Thompson, Dowling and Reinhardt staying on as envoys in Moscow, Bonn and Cairo. These men have proved their great competence and devotion.

Furthermore, the President displays admirable resolve to seek out the best available talent even when he must resurrect individuals who had been previously discouraged from continuing public careers. Thus, he not only prevailed upon Kennan to return; he has brought General Gavin back—if in another capacity; eventually he may well replace Dulles with General Taylor when the former retires.

This emphasis on harnessing capability has, however, been marred by one departure from the President's previous intentions. Prior to his election he said frequently he would insist that all our Ambassadors in vital posts should, where reasonably possible, speak the local language. He shows signs of forgetting this pledge.

Thus we find the brilliant Gavin, who cannot be called fluent in French, designated as representative in France. The exquisitely mannered General Biddle is slated for Spain, although hardly expert in Spanish. And the two leading candidates for Italy, Messrs. Roosevelt and Benton, could never aspire to pass as native Romans.

These distinguished men may prove to be highly successful. But there must be other Americans among our 180,000,000 who have perhaps equal competence plus linguistic ability. We certainly have career diplomats who speak French, Spanish and Italian as well as Messrs. Dowling and Thompson speak German and Russian.

The President has carried out his promise to see that nobody shall be disqualified by lack of funds from expensive posts hitherto available only to millionaires. Gavin is an example of this welcome change. It is therefore all the more a pity that Mr. Kennedy, who had also promised to give such weight to language considerations, is not doing so.

In France and Spain, crucial business must be done with de Gaulle or Franco, neither of whom speaks English. That means the awkward formula of interpreters. Anybody who has ever seen de Gaulle's face grow longer at the prospect—or Franco's patient look of boredom—knows this system is unsatisfactory.

The French have much interest and sympathy in Gavin, among the first Americans to touch their soil in 1944. But a General who knows him well assures me he doesn't speak French and the Elysée Palace politely affirms that reports of his "friendship" with de Gaulle simply aren't true. While the U. S. A. probably doesn't boast many intimates of de Gaulle, it surely can claim a modicum of French-speakers.

Kennedy wouldn't be eligible for any particular blame had he himself not raised the subject during the campaign. None of our post-war envoys here has been remarkable for knowledge of French. In Italy we fared a bit better, thanks to the long tenure of James Clement Dunn. In Spain we had one talented Hispanist; but his political judgment was less commendable.

Our country should have little difficulty in finding envoys able to face the world's Babel. We are the melting pot *par excellence*, inhabited by people originating all over the earth. As the richest nation, we should give our citizens an education including knowledge of foreign tongues.

No matter how delightful, persuasive and profound he might be, the Ambassador to Washington from some other land—who can't speak English well—finds himself embarrassed and politically crippled. It is too bad we don't remember this simple fact—as applied to us.

Surely the New Frontier might better be explained to others without benefit of interpreters—at least in such relatively simple tongues as French, Italian and Spanish. It is hard to be a Talleyrand through a translator.

25X1A